

Mozambique province hit hard by drought and prolonged war

(X)

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MAQUEZE (Mozambique).

DAVID BALANE (85) has lived all his life in the southern Mozambican province of Gaza, and he has never seen a situation quite so desperate as today's lethal combination of drought and war.

He thinks mere survival has become "almost impossible" for thousands of people in the eastern Gaza district of Chibuto. "Even during the time of the whites (the colonial period), I don't remember a situation as dramatic as this.

"People may know of the existence of wild plants somewhere that they can eat, but we can't reach these places, because the Matsangas might kill us," Cde Balane said in an interview. Matsangas is the name commonly given to the MNR bandits: it is derived from the name of their first commander-in-chief, Andre Matsangaissa, who died in 1979.

"There have been several occasions when people, motivated by hunger, ventured deep into the bush," continued the old man. "They didn't come back. They were killed by the Matsangas."

Cde Balane had to flee his home village, Maungo, when it came under MNR attack in February. "It was like a hurricane had hit it," he recalled. "Nothing was left standing." Now he and his family live in the relatively safe Maqueze.

Cde Balane and his family are farmers, but in Maqueze they have no opportunity to cultivate the land. They are surviving on roots.

"As if the shortage of food isn't enough, my

wife and the other women in the family have to walk 14 kilometres to Alto Changane and back to fetch water every day," said Cde Balane. Each woman brings a container of 20 litres from the well in Alto Changane.

The drought mystifies Cde Balane, and he can only blame it on supernatural factors. He thinks the drought must be due to "the spirits who are angry because of this war without any sense or logic".

He recalled that in March MNR bandits attacked and set on fire five trucks of the country's relief body, the Disasters Control Office, that were carrying food aid to Maqueze.

"The bandits are so evil that despite the famine in the province, they even burn trucks with tonnes of maize on board."

Cde Armindo Massingue, a truck owner, has escaped two MNR ambushes this year.

Businessmen in Maqueze are also annoyed at what they regard as the high taxes demanded from them by the finance ministry.

"They never come here, but they know how to demand taxes," said one bitter trader, who refused to be named.

"Why don't they see what our sales really are, before making their tax calculations?"

Cde Ernesto Govane attacked the insensitivity of the finance ministry towards the problems of people living in war zones. "The finance ministry should tolerate our delays in paying our taxes, because they know very well that we're in a war situation," he said. — Ziana-AIM.